Decentering the Ego

As some of you may have begun to guess, I take the notion of a lifelong spiritual journey very seriously. Yet progress on our spiritual journey in life is often alien to our ego selves. Internal peace and equanimity often appear contrary to our ego goals. The spiritual journey is not about what your or my ego wants, but rather it is about becoming awake to the interdependent web of all being, of which we are a small, but important, part. What Martin Luther King Jr. calls an inescapable network of mutuality. To make spiritual progress, to find more joy and equanimity, we need to begin by decentering our ego self. We are stardust and we are dog poop.

Fortunately, life often gives us abundant opportunities to decenter our ego. After a decade as a successful biotechnology entrepreneur, in 1993 I was very abruptly fired by my public company board of directors in a massive industry downturn. I was devastated. My ego-self wanted to prove my worth by accepting an even better job, at a company with better technology, where I would have a stronger management team, and again rise to the top of my industry. Well-meaning friends said that when you are thrown from a horse, it is important to jump on another.

My eleven-year-old daughter thought otherwise. She said, "Dad, you are not temperamentally suited to lead biotechnology companies and be the father of this family." I was deeply offended, even though I liked that my eleven year could use words like "temperamentally," still I was a nationally recognized successful entrepreneur! When I finally calmed down, I asked her what she meant by such a comment. She said, "Here's what happens. You get excited about some new technology. You raise tens of millions of dollars, and hire hundreds of scientists and other employees to pursue it, and it never works out as you anticipated. So, you are often away working for the company, and when you are with us, you are mostly thinking about their problems rather than ours."

I love my wife and kids, and loved being a biotechnology entrepreneur, so I pointed out that it didn't have to be that way. I could try harder. My wife pointed out that my two successful entrepreneurial start-ups, over the last ten years, had both played out exactly that way. Having hired hundreds of people, and taken tens of millions of dollars from investors, my ego self would not allow me to let the company fail. So, when times get rough, and they always did, I would begin working eighty or ninety hours a week, giving up our nights and weekends, to try and help the company succeed. And my health, wellbeing, and relationships with my wife and kids would all suffer accordingly.

This was a moment of spiritual awakening for me. As much as I loved it, there was more to life than being a biotechnology entrepreneur. I turned down several attractive biotech jobs as Chief Executive Officer and meditated on what life was calling me towards. My spiritual journey and experiences of divine mystery deepened during this period. For the first time in many years, I was at peace, without seeking or needing external validation. I wasn't becoming successful or rich, I was just being, and being was good. I could be a fully realized human being.

Serendipity began to bring new possibilities into this liminal space I had created. The founders of new start-ups, often with very interesting new technologies, approached me to serve as an advisor to them and join their board of directors. Wealthy individuals and small institutions, who had made a lot of

money investing in my companies in the past, approached to say they trusted me, which is no small thing, and asked if they could invest in whatever I did next. Younger entrepreneurs approached to ask if I would mentor them. And my executive assistant from my last company quit her job, she said my successor was not a nice person, and said she would work with me again. Fate was calling.

Sherblom, originally spelled sjo-blom, means sea-flower in Swedish. So, I created Seaflower Ventures, a boutique life sciences investment fund, in which I invested considerable funds of my own money and investors added millions more. My executive assistant became our office manager and we hired three bright young executives to work with us. I was very clear with all my investors and employees, however under no conditions would I work more than fifty hours per week, and never on the weekend. The time for my family, and my expanding spiritual life, were too precious to let them suffer for mere finanical success.

I invested in, and/or joined the board of, Alpha-Beta Technology (a drug developer), Geltex (a drug delivery company), Ecoscience (organic pesticides), and Boston Biomedica (biotech blood products). This was perhaps the happiest time of my working life. I might work with our companies in the morning, discuss the broader portfolio with my partners over lunch and in the early afternoon, and by late afternoon head home to watch my daughter play soccer or go hiking with my son. Most evenings during their middle school and early high school years centered around dinner and conversation among just the four of us.

I recognize that few have the luxury of time that I did to parent in this way. But many of those who could make the time, if they chose to decenter their ego desires, and instead placed their family's needs at the center of their lives, would be surprised at how much less stressful, how much more life giving, is a more balanced life that includes family, career and spiritual life. We are only here for a short while, and many of us, particularly those of us lured by success, are missing it. If my eleven-year-old had not given me a wake-up call when I was 38, the next two decades of my life would have turned out very differently.

I have nothing against driven corporate executives, investment bankers, management consultants, or anyone who is following their dreams. The question always is, at what cost, and to whom? You see, our ego is a wonderful servant, and a horrible master. If you grew up poor, and wish to become wealthy, you sometimes need to assert your ego to do so. If you want to excel in your field, rising above all others, it doesn't happen without effort. Our ego self can help motivate us to succeed.

But when our ego dictates how we spend our precious hours, our days, our months, our lives, it can be a horrific taskmaster, causing suffering and pain for those who must live with us, work with us, or even be with us. An ego driven person is often insufferable to anyone who cares about us. If we took monastic vows, seriously pursuing our spiritual lives above all else, depending upon the religious tradition, we would be encouraged to surrender, demolish, or transcend our ego to make spiritual progress. Living in this world we often need a healthy ego in order to survive, and thrive, but we can still learn to decenter that ego, in order to become the husband/wife, father/mother, son or daughter, employer/employee, congregant or citizen we are capable of being.

Living in this interdependent web of being, it matters who is in control. That anxious, prideful, driven to succeed at any cost, ego driven self; or the caring, compassionate, grateful and generous being we are capable of being as well. My wife and I are about to celebrate our fortieth wedding anniversary, and are still very much in love with each other. Our children are in their thirties, and are truly remarkable people, with good relationships with their parents, and a good outlook on their life.

Unfortunately, learning to decenter my ego was not a one-time thing. Anywhere success or ambition can find a foothold, even when you set out to do something righteous, the ego can gradually creep back in, making the righteous self-righteous, and trapping us once again. After a decade as a seed venture capitalist, I became a Unitarian Universalist parish minister, serving as Co-Minister at First Parish in Brookline. The congregation spiritually deepened, grew and prospered over the next ten years. I was very proud of what we accomplished together. Yet, eventually it became time for me to leave, for my own continued spiritual growth as well as the spiritual health and wellbeing of the congregation. I needed to decenter my ego to realize that too much of the congregation's decision making and life was centered on me, and the particular gifts and shortcomings I brought to my ministry. Both the congregation and I have now prospered in remarkable ways since my retirement from parish ministry. And my books are my new ministry.

So, I ask you now, to examine your own heart. Are there ways in which your ego self has inappropriately taken center stage in your life? Are there ways in which your life could be better, healthier, more life giving, and sweeter by your decentering your ego self? There is nothing wrong with the dreams and ambitions of the ego, often they are what help us to succeed in life, but they become harmful when they become our master, shaping and distorting our lives in stressful and unhealthy ways. Then its time to decenter the ego, choosing health and wellbeing over material things, as we rebalance our lives to become what we are capable of being: caring and compassionate beings with big hearts.

Only then are we fit to join the chorus of angels, in this network of mutuality, working to bend the world towards justice. As MLK would say, "Injustice [or self-righteousness] anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted. Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that… Before it is too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war… We shall hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope." And so may it be.

As Gandhi prayed, "Let us be the change that we seek." Our spiritual journeys require that we speak and act on behalf of justice in the world. Especially for those for whom it has so long been denied. But to join them in this fight, with an appropriate sense of humility, we must first learn to decenter our ego selves. Then we can lift our voices and sing till earth and heaven ring, bringing justice and liberty to the world. For this I pray, unceasingly, blessed be and amen.